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Govt struggles to punish Citarum polluters

Arya Dipa, The Jakarta Post, Bandung | Archipelago | Fri, November 08 2013, 8:11 AM

A lack of law enforcement personnel and evidence have hampered the Environment Ministry in its attempts to solve cases of environmental damage in the Citarum River, West Java, an official at the ministry said on Thursday.

The Citarum River, along with Chernobyl in Ukraine, has been listed as one of the world's 10 most polluted places in an annual report released by the environmental organization Green Cross Switzerland and international nonprofit organization the Blacksmith Institute on Monday.

The river, the largest water basin on Java, is the key water source for West Java and Jakarta. The water from the river basin is used for irrigation, agriculture, fisheries, industry and hydropower.

Textile factories in Bandung and Cimahi have been blamed for contributing to pollution in the 297-kilometer river.

"We have only 12 active investigators to handle all environment-related cases in Indonesia. The number is far from ideal," Environment Ministry law enforcement head Saifudin Akbar Mahpar told The Jakarta Post over the phone on Thursday.

He said an investigator ideally handled a maximum of three cases, but at the ministry, one investigator could take on as many as 13 at any one time.

Saifudin said a lack of evidence had also been a key problem.

According to data at the ministry, between 2003 and 2007, there were at least 1,200 industrial companies that had potentially polluted the river, but only 35 companies had been brought to justice.

Saifudin said in 43 percent of cases, the companies were declared innocent.

"We have tried to find evidence, but when it was brought to court, it was a different story. There were times when judges and prosecutors were not convinced with the evidence presented. So the judges declared the companies not guilty," Saifudin explained.

In 30 percent of the cases, the defendants were sentenced to probation. "If they do it again, they might face harsher punishment. But this doesn't deter the companies [from polluting the Citarum]," said Saifudin.

Despite its reputation as the most polluted river, the Citarum has been appointed to hold the first Riverboarding World Championship.

Separately, in Batam, Riau Islands, dozens of residents and activists

staged a protest on Thursday at the Batam administration office, urging the Batam Environmental Impact Control Agency (Bapedal) to take action against several international tobacco companies for allegedly dumping waste in nearby housing areas.

People's Movement (Gebrak) head Uba Ingan Sigalingging said his NGO had received reports from residents who had filed complaints on the stench of used tobacco waste.

"How could this happen? Why has the administration not arrested those responsible for the waste? How can the Bapedal issue permits to these companies?" asked Uba during the rally.

Uba said according to his team's investigation, the companies threw waste on a number of areas, including Legenda Bali and Legenda Malaka residential complexes, Batam Center, and some spots in Sagulung and Batu Aji.

The Jakarta Post visited some of the aforementioned locations and the unpleasant odor of tobacco waste, which was thrown in the bushes, could be detected.

Meanwhile, law enforcement head at the Batam Bapedal, Noviandra, said that he would follow up the report.

"We will do check and recheck on the issue. There are many tobacco companies operating in Batam so we need some time to investigate which companies that have caused the problem," said Noviandra.

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